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Multicultural Children:  
Their Cultural Identities as Communicated by Their Parents

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## ABSTRACT

Parents from different cultural backgrounds may often lack information on helping their multicultural children to develop healthy cultural identities. The views and strategies of twenty parents regarding the cultural identities communicated to their children are presented in this interview-based case-study in the greater Tokyo area of Japan. Seventeen respondents are non-Japanese with children to Japanese partners; two are non-Japanese with a non-Japanese partner with a different cultural background; and one is Japanese married to a non-Japanese partner. Six respondents chose to identify their children as *Japanese*; another six chose a *Combined* identity; and eight chose a *Global* identity. Six major factors in the development of a healthy cultural identity emerged: language, visits to parents' home countries, schooling and/or peer groups, religious and/or cultural activities, names, and physical appearance.

Suggestions are made to parents of multicultural children to develop linguistic abilities, to facilitate immersion in target cultures, to develop awareness of relevant cultural activities, and to provide culturally-appropriate names. Parents are encouraged to combine different cultural aspects in different areas of their children's lives, to teach their children about their own cultures, and to remember that each child is unique. In addition, the iceberg metaphor of culture presented by Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) has been adapted to illustrate multicultural identities. This study has confirmed the need for further qualitative and quantitative studies on the development of cultural identities in multicultural children.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Globalisation is affecting every aspect of our society, including one of the most important institutions, the family. With more international couples having families, a growing number of children are being raised with multiple cultural influences. As the mother of two multicultural children, I first became aware of this issue when my cousin-in-law (five years old at the time) innocently asked on witnessing her cousin's and my relationship develop, "When a Japanese man and a foreign woman get married, will their sons be Japanese and their daughters foreign?" (Y. Ozawa, personal communication, December 1992). This raises the question of what strategies are being used by parents to build a stable cultural identity for their children when the parents themselves are from different cultures. However, the issues involved in raising children in this situation are not widely discussed in current literature.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Recently, increased attention has been given to the identity of biracial, or multiracial, people (Root, 1992). This interest is supported by demographical evidence of a rapid increase in the numbers of multiracial people, along with an awareness of the need for more theory and research in this area (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995). Indeed, the growth in numbers of multiracial people amongst minority groups is becoming evident in certain parts of the world, such as in the United States where projections show minorities comprising more than half of the workforce in 2007 (Mindell, 1998). In other words, the number of people in various minority groups combined will form a new majority. Of these minorities, a growing number are identifying as belonging to more than one race (Root). This highlights the importance of understanding how multicultural identities are formed and of

having the foresight to study the multicultural children who will play a major role in our future society.

The modern global economy is a catalyst for this increase in the number of children born to parents of different cultural backgrounds (Anderson, 1999). Luke and Luke (1998) conclude that one of the key sites where identity is formed is in the family. However, parents of multicultural children have little anecdotal advice on raising children with multicultural identities. It is therefore crucial that we study multicultural families in order to understand how multicultural children's identities are formed. This leads us to this study's two research questions: *What cultural identities are parents encouraging their multicultural children to have?* and *What strategies are being used by parents to build stable cultural identities for their children?*

It should be noted that this study assumes that *race* does not equal *culture*. It accepts the general consensus that although racial background can influence culture, it does not determine it. Race refers to the physical aspects of a person, which is controlled by DNA; culture refers to the social aspects of a person, which is influenced by people. Concepts of race and culture vary around the world. While some Europeans may avoid issues of race (due to memories of Hitler's regime); some American literature talks about biracial children (as the many racial groups in the United States share a common American culture). In Asia, and particularly in Japan where this study is based, race and culture are almost interchangeable. This study is concerned with culture and not race. However, where other writers have referred to race or ethnicity, these terms are used to avoid misrepresentation.



### *Definition of Terms*

Before we can discuss the topic of the cultural identities of multicultural children, we first need to define the terms *cultural identity* and *multicultural*. *Cultural identity* can be broken down into *culture* and *identity*. Many definitions of *culture* are abstract, using such words as *values* and *artefacts*. In addition, the word *culture* has a variety of meanings, ranging from art forms to a *culture* grown in a science laboratory. To avoid confusion, a specific definition is required for this report. A behavioural definition is most appropriate, as this is a study of the practice of parenting. After much searching for the exact definition that I require for this report, I developed the following definition: ***Culture is the complex combination of beliefs (including religion, attitudes, and values), activities (including daily lifestyles and rituals), and ways of communicating (including ways of thinking, a linguistic system, symbols, and non-verbal activities) shared by a particular group of people.*** This definition is designed to include particular words, such as *complex combination* (as culture is comprised of numerous aspects), *beliefs* (as these can be culture-specific), *activities* (as culture is evident in activities such as, eating, socialising, and religious activities), *ways of communicating* (as language and other forms of communication reveal much about a particular culture), and *shared by a particular group of people* (although an individual has a unique combination of cultures, making that person unique, each culture is shared with a group of people).

Kanno (2003) defines *identity* as “our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world” (p. 3). While our sense of identity may come from our relationship to the world, our sense of cultural identity comes from our relationship to and more precisely our

belonging to, certain cultural groups. Using the above definitions of *culture* and *identity*, my definition of *cultural identity* is: ***our sense of who we are, based on the complex combination of beliefs (including religion, attitudes, and values), activities (including daily lifestyles and rituals), and ways of communicating (including ways of thinking, a linguistic system, symbols, and non-verbal activities) shared with a particular group of people.*** This identity is shared with other members of the same group and an individual may identify with more than one group. Additionally, this identification may change over time and therefore our cultural identities may also change over time.

Most definitions of the term *multicultural* refer to society being multicultural in its attitudes, or being comprised of members from different cultural groups. However, this report requires a definition of multiculturalism within an individual. There are definitions for *biculturalism* which refer to an individual. For example, Buriel and Saenz (1980) define *bicultural* as follows: “an integration of the competencies and sensitivities associated with two cultures within a single individual” (cited in LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p.246). It is presumptuous to assume that all parents are monocultural (belonging to one culture) and therefore their children are bicultural (belonging to two cultures). In fact, many parents in this study claimed a cultural background of more than one culture (see Table 1 on pages 37 and 38). So, it would be inappropriate to refer to their children as being bicultural. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the term *multicultural* is used and is inclusive of the term *bicultural*.

Then, what does this term *multicultural* mean? A suitable definition of *multicultural* is obtained by replacing the words *two cultures* with *more than one culture* in

Buriel and Saenz's definition above. Further, Williams' (1992) idea of simultaneous loyalty to more than one culture could be added, to illustrate the idea of the sense of belonging to those groups. Therefore, being *multicultural* is: ***an integration of the competencies and sensitivities associated with, and simultaneous loyalty to, more than one culture within a single individual.*** As the children of the parents interviewed in this study have parents with different cultural identities, they have multicultural influences within their closest realms- their families. Therefore, the term *multicultural* is used to describe these children, although it is appropriate in each case to varying degrees.

### *Overview*

This chapter introduced the topic of the identities of multicultural children and defined related terminology. The following chapter (Chapter II: Literature Review) examines the theories and real-life examples of multicultural identity provided by literature over a variety of disciplines. At the end of the chapter, I identify where this study fits amongst its multi-disciplinary predecessors. Chapter III: Methodology describes the way respondents were obtained and interviewed, including a description of the questionnaire format. This is followed by Chapter IV: Results, which includes an introduction of the respondents (including their photographs), an analysis of the identities they have chosen for their children, and a comprehensive presentation of the ways they are encouraging those identities. Finally, Chapter V: Discussion explains the significance of the results, in relation to both literature and society. The research questions are answered and recommendations are made for further research. Additionally, a list of references, the questionnaire, information sheet and consent form used for the interviews, and photos and identifiers of the respondents are appended to this report for easy reference.